

The Empire and Christianity

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farmer were almost taxed out of existence by this monstrous system. Every ten or fifteen years, it is true, a revision of the assessments took place, and there were certain officials, with the significant name of *defensores*, whose duty it was to prevent the provincials from being fleeced too flagrantly. But a man might easily be reduced to beggary by a succession of bad harvests before the year of revision came round, and the *defensors* office was a sinecure except in the rare occasions when he knew that he would be backed at the headquarters of the diocese. During ~ Constantine's reign, or at least during its closing years, there is overpowering evidence that the provincial governors were allowed to plunder at discretion. They imitated the reckless prodigality of their sovereign, who, in 331, was compelled to issue an edict to restrain the peculation of his officers. There is a very striking phrase in Ammianus Marcel-linus who says that while Constantine started the practice of opening the greedy jaws of his favourites, his son, Constantius, fattened them up on the very marrow of the provinces.* Evidently, the incidence of this land tax inflicted great hardships and had the mischievous result of draining the province of capital, and of dragging down to ruin the independent cultivator of the land. Hence districts were constantly in arrears of payment, and the remission of outstanding debt to the treasury was usually the first step taken by an Emperor to court popularity with his subjects.

* *Proximorum fauces apermt primus omnium
Constantinus sed eos medullis provindarum saginavit
Constantius* (xvi., c. 8, 12).